

## Cricket 189

### Chapter 189

The gates to the Tendulkar residence opened soundlessly as Aarav's car rolled in, sunlight glinting off the metallic blue of his Urus. The air smelled faintly of rain and bougainvillea—a soft, late-morning Mumbai fragrance that always carried a strange nostalgia. His heartbeat quickened the moment he spotted her.

Shradha stood by the door, her hair tumbling loosely over her shoulders, wearing a white cotton top and faded blue jeans. The simplicity of her look struck him more than any glamour could. She had that effortless radiance that didn't need dressing up. The instant their eyes met, a month of distance vanished like mist.

Aarav parked, barely taking a moment to switch off the engine before stepping out. Shradha didn't wait either. The moment he closed the car door, she was already walking toward him—half running, half smiling. He met her halfway, and before either spoke, they fell into each other's arms.

It wasn't a gentle hug—it was the kind that comes after too long apart. Tight, desperate, full of every word unsaid. Aarav buried his face in her hair, breathing her in—the faint scent of jasmine and coffee. Her arms wrapped around his neck, holding him like she feared he might disappear again.

When they finally pulled back, their eyes lingered. A smile, a breath, and then a kiss—soft, quick, and full of all the things they didn't have to say. It wasn't about passion; it was about relief. About being home.

She rested her forehead against his for a second, laughing softly. "You took your own sweet time, Pathak."

"I drove under the speed limit, Miss Tendulkar," he replied, his grin teasing. "National treasure, remember?"

She rolled her eyes, tugging at his sleeve. "Get in before someone spots you."

Hand in hand, they slipped into the house. The Tendulkar home had the kind of understated elegance that came from years of comfort—muted walls, warm wood, photos lining the hall. Shradha led him into the living room, where sunlight spilled through sheer curtains and a faint hum of the ceiling fan filled the quiet.

They sank onto the couch, still holding hands like they might vanish if they let go.

"Can't believe you're actually here," she said softly.

"Neither can I," he said. "Feels unreal."

"You've been everywhere lately—TV, interviews, headlines, parades."

He looked at her, smiling faintly. "And now, here. This is where I wanted to be."

Her smile melted. She leaned her head against his shoulder, and for a few minutes, they didn't talk. The silence between them wasn't empty—it was full, heavy with comfort and memory. The sound of birds outside and the faint murmur of the sea through open windows wrapped around them like music.

After a while, she sat up, eyes sparkling. "Okay, hero. Let's do something fun. You haven't had proper homemade food in months, right?"

"Right."

"Then we're cooking today."

Aarav raised an eyebrow. "We?"

"Yes, we." She got up, hands on her hips. "You, me, kitchen, chaos."

He laughed, shaking his head. "You do remember the last time you tried cooking?"

"That was ages ago!" she protested. "I've improved."

"Sure you have." He followed her, amused.

The kitchen looked freshly renovated—marble counters, neat racks of spices, the faint aroma of something floral in the air. Shradha opened the fridge, scanning its contents with the seriousness of a general before battle.

"So, chef," Aarav said, leaning against the counter, arms folded. "What's the plan?"

"Something simple," she replied confidently. "Aloo paratha."

Aarav tried not to laugh. "Simple, huh?"

She glared at him. "Don't test me, Pathak."

He put his hands up in surrender. "Alright, boss. Show me."

The next half hour was chaos. Flour everywhere, rolling pins clattering, and Shradha alternating between determination and disaster. At one point, she sneezed because of too much atta dust, and Aarav burst out laughing.

"Oh, shut up!" she said, laughing too. "You're supposed to help!"

"I am helping," he said, still laughing. "Helping you fail faster."

"Mean!" she said, swatting his arm with the rolling pin.

He caught her wrist mid-swat, smiling. "You're cute when you threaten me."

Her eyes softened for a moment, and she quickly looked away, cheeks warming. "Just make the filling," she muttered.

"Yes, ma'am." He moved to the stove, chopping boiled potatoes with quick precision. His movements were smooth, confident.

Shradha paused, watching him. There was something grounding about him in moments like this—no cameras, no pressure, just Aarav in his element. She smiled faintly, then turned back to her dough, rolling another shapeless paratha that looked more like a continent than a circle.

When she tried flipping it, it tore in half. Aarav chuckled. "Congratulations. You've invented aloo papad."

"Stop laughing or I'll throw this at you!" she warned.

He leaned closer, voice low and teasing. "Promise?"

She gave him a mock glare, but her lips twitched. Then, impulsively, she dabbed some flour on his cheek. He blinked, taken aback. "Oh, it's war now."

In seconds, a playful battle began—flour on his shirt, dough on her hands, both of them laughing uncontrollably. The kitchen looked like a snowstorm by the end of it. Aarav cornered her near the counter, both of them breathless with laughter. "Truce?" he asked, catching her wrist lightly.

"Maybe." She tried to sound stern, but her eyes betrayed her amusement.

"Say it."

"Fine. Truce."

But she said it softly, looking up at him. The laughter faded into something quieter, warmer. Their faces were inches apart. His hand still held hers; her pulse quickened under his touch. For a long moment, neither spoke. The world outside vanished.

Then she smiled, breaking the tension. "You've got flour on your face, you know."

He grinned. "So do you."

He wiped a bit off her cheek gently, his thumb brushing her skin. She caught his wrist for a second, eyes locking with his. It was one of those moments that felt suspended in time—half laughter, half tenderness.

"Okay," she whispered, stepping back before things melted further. "We're cleaning this before Mom sees."

Aarav laughed, letting her go. "Good call."

They cleaned up together, still teasing, still laughing. By the time they finally sat down to eat, the parathas were misshapen, uneven—but they were theirs. They ate cross-legged on the floor, sharing bites, arguing about whose was worse.

Afterward, they moved to the terrace. The afternoon sun was soft now, golden and lazy. Shradha sat with her head on Aarav's shoulder, her fingers tracing small patterns on his hand.

"I missed this," she said quietly.

"Me too."

"Do you ever get tired of it?" she asked suddenly. "The fame, the noise?"

He thought for a while. "Sometimes. But then I remember why I play. Why I started. It's not for them. It's for me... and for people who matter."

"Like?" she asked, a small smile playing on her lips.

He looked down at her. "Like you."

She blushed, pretending to roll her eyes, but her fingers tightened around his. They sat in silence for a while, watching the sun dip lower.

As evening approached, the lights of Mumbai began to shimmer in the distance. Shradha turned toward him, eyes thoughtful. "You know this can't stay secret forever."

"I know," he said. "But for now... I like it this way. Just us. No noise."

She nodded, leaning closer. "Just us."

The city lights reflected in their eyes—two young hearts caught between fame and love, trying to hold on to something real in a world that watched too closely.

Shradha followed him to the door, her bare feet padding silently on the cool tiles. The hug they shared was different this time—softer, more lingering, as if their bodies were trying to memorize each other's contours. Her arms wrapped around his waist, her cheek pressing against the steady rise and fall of his

chest. She could feel the heat radiating from him, the subtle rhythm of his heartbeat syncing with her own. "Don't go for today," she whispered, her voice barely audible, laced with a vulnerability that surprised even her.

Aarav froze, his hand on the doorknob. The words hung in the air like a delicate thread, pulling at something deep within him. He turned slowly at first, but then the hesitation shattered. Aggression surged through him—not born of anger, but of a raw, unspoken need that had been building all evening. He moved toward her with purposeful strides, his eyes darkening with intent. Shradha's breath caught as he closed the distance, his hands gripping her waist firmly, lifting her effortlessly into his arms.

She responded instinctively, her legs locking around his hips, her fingers tangling in his hair. The world narrowed to the sensation of his body against hers—strong, unyielding, yet tender in its urgency. Aarav carried her through the hallway, his steps steady despite the fire racing through his veins. The door to her bedroom swung open with a gentle push, and he lowered her onto the bed, their lips meeting in a kiss that was all-consuming.

The room was a sanctuary of soft whites and pastels, the bedspread rumpled from earlier laziness, pillows scattered like forgotten thoughts. Moonlight began to peek through the window as the sun dipped lower, painting their skin in silvery hues. Aarav's hands roamed her back, pulling her closer, his mouth exploring hers with a hunger that spoke of weeks—months, even—of restrained desire. Shradha arched into him, her nails grazing his shoulders, eliciting a low groan from deep in his throat.

They broke apart momentarily, gasping for air, their foreheads resting together. Her eyes met his, wide and searching, filled with a mix of wonder and longing. "Aarav," she murmured, her voice a breathy plea. He didn't respond with words; instead, he kissed her again, slower this time, savoring the taste of her—sweet like the tea they'd shared earlier, with a hint of spice that mirrored her spirit.

The make-out session intensified, their bodies pressing together in a rhythm that felt both new and inevitable. Aarav's fingers traced the curve of her spine, slipping under the hem of her shirt, feeling the warmth of her skin. Shradha's hands explored his chest, unbuttoning his shirt with trembling urgency, revealing the taut muscles beneath. They stared into each other's eyes between kisses, the intensity

building like a storm on the horizon. Her gaze held his, vulnerable yet bold, as if daring him to see all of her—the fears, the hopes, the unspoken dreams.

Again and again, they came together, lips crashing, tongues dancing in a passionate tango. The room filled with the sounds of their shared breaths, the rustle of fabric, the occasional soft moan that escaped unbidden. Aarav pulled back once more, his thumb brushing her swollen lips, his eyes tracing her face as if committing every freckle, every curve to memory. "You're beautiful," he whispered, his voice rough with emotion.

Shradha smiled, a flush creeping up her neck, and pulled him down for another kiss. This one was deeper, more exploratory, their bodies aligning perfectly on the bed. She felt the weight of him above her, grounding her in the moment, chasing away the shadows of doubt that had plagued their earlier conversations. They made out with a fervor that blurred the lines between affection and desire, hands wandering, hearts pounding in unison.

Finally, they slowed, collapsing into a tangle of limbs. Aarav rolled onto his back, pulling Shradha with him so she lay atop his chest. She nestled her head against him, ear pressed to the steady thrum of his heartbeat—a reassuring drumbeat that echoed her own racing pulse. His arms encircled her, one hand stroking her hair gently, the other resting possessively on the small of her back. The hug was intimate, protective, a silent promise in the quiet of the room.

They lay there for what felt like hours, though the clock on the nightstand ticked only minutes. The world outside faded—the distant hum of city traffic, the occasional bark of a neighbor's dog—leaving only them, wrapped in each other's warmth. Shradha traced lazy patterns on his chest with her fingertip, feeling the rise and fall of his breathing. "This feels right," she said softly, her voice muffled against his skin.

Aarav tilted his head to look at her, his eyes softening. "It does. More than anything." He paused, gathering his thoughts, the romantic talk flowing naturally now that the barriers had crumbled. "I've been thinking about us, Shradha. Not just tonight, but... the future. What it could look like."

She lifted her head slightly, propping her chin on his chest, her eyes meeting his. "Tell me," she encouraged, her voice laced with curiosity and a hint of excitement. No talk of cricket or mundane distractions; this was about them, their shared path ahead.

He smiled, a genuine one that crinkled the corners of his eyes. "I see us building something real. Mornings where I wake up to your smile, evenings like this—talking, laughing, just being. Maybe a little house somewhere quiet, with a garden you can tend to, full of those flowers you love. And kids, someday, if that's what we want—little ones with your eyes and my stubbornness."

Shradha laughed softly, the sound vibrating through him. "Stubbornness? From you? Never." She teased, but her expression grew serious, tender. "I want that too, Aarav. A life where we support each other's dreams."

As the night deepened, exhaustion crept in, a gentle wave lulling them toward sleep. Shradha's eyelids grew heavy, her body relaxing fully against his. Aarav held her tighter, his own breaths slowing, matching hers. The heartbeat under her ear became a lullaby, steady and sure. They drifted off together, entwined in the bed, the world outside forgotten in the bliss of their newfound intimacy.

The next morning dawned softly, sunlight streaming through the gaps in the curtains, painting golden stripes across the rumpled sheets. Shradha stirred first, her eyes fluttering open to the sight of Aarav's peaceful face, his features softened in sleep. She watched him for a moment, marveling at how vulnerable he looked, how perfectly he fit into her life. Carefully, so as not to wake him, she slipped from his arms and padded to the kitchen, the cool floor sending a shiver up her spine.

The aroma of fresh coffee soon filled the air, mingling with the scent of toast browning in the old toaster. She hummed a soft tune, an old Bollywood melody that reminded her of rainy afternoons with her grandmother. When Aarav emerged, hair tousled and eyes still heavy with sleep, he wrapped his arms around her from behind, nuzzling her neck. "Morning," he murmured, his voice gravelly and warm.

"Morning," she replied, turning in his embrace to kiss him. It was a lazy kiss, full of the contentment that comes from a night well-spent. They ate breakfast at the small table by the window, overlooking the bustling street below. Conversation was light at first—comments on the weather, the birds flitting between buildings—but soon deepened as they revisited the dreams from the night before.